

Review

Rifle Reports: A Story of Indonesian Independence by Mary Margaret Steedly
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What did Indonesia's independence struggle look like at the "outskirts" of the nation? Mary Margaret Steedly's *Rifle Reports: A Story of Indonesian Independence* considers this question through an ethnographic history documenting the war experience of residents in the Karo highlands of Sumatra. Based on over 100 interviews with Karo residents—mostly of women—conducted between 1993 and 1995, Steedly attempts to de-center the male-centric and Java-centric history of Indonesian independence. While women are left out of most of the war's heroic narratives, Steedly finds a rich history of women contributing to the struggle. While Indonesia's periphery is often described as only tangentially effected by revolutionary events, Steedly finds the Karo highlands were a point of intense fighting and that the Karo people took up the nationalist cause with zeal. Through a synthesis of interview data with diverse secondary sources, including the song "Erkata Bedil" which inspired the book's title, Steedly effectively brings women's unrecognized war experiences into the nationalist narrative.

However, by highlighting the experiences of Karo women, Steedly is not simply attempting to spread nationalist glory more evenly or to insert new names and faces into a unified story of nationalist struggle. Instead, the book's strength is its treatment of the national project as contingent. The spread of the nationalist cause was not inevitable. Rather, it required articulation and interpretation of terms such as "independence" (*merdeka*) and came with misunderstandings, colorfully exemplified by the story of the old man so used to shouting "Merdeka!" ("Independence!") as a salute to soldiers in uniform that he yelled it at occupying Dutch troops and was immediately shot. More hauntingly, given later outbreaks of political violence in Indonesia's post-independence history, Steedly documents the internal violence of the revolution that

was motivated by fears over internal collaborators, which has been under "narrative quarantine" from nationalist narratives.

Steedly's methods and writing create a rich poly-vocal history of the national project. The prose is well written and Steedly's weaving together of various

sources begs readers to immerse themselves in the narratives rather than skim for arguments. Steedly is sensitive to her own role in the collection of narratives, but her informants remain the central focus and are written about with empathy. There is, however, a tension regarding whether the work is primarily about informants' war time experiences or their memory practices decades later. While Steedly succeeds in the former, readers may feel she has not fully leveraged her ethnographic experience to address the latter. In particular, given the unique timing of her interviews, conducted a few years before the fall of the Suharto in 1998 and written about with over a decade of hindsight, one might have expected more analysis of the impact of the authoritarian context on her informants' narrative and memory practices.

The Indonesian national project has served to stimulate a wide literature on the social construction of the nation and Steedly's work is a worthy contribution. *Rifle Reports* is empirically rich, well-crafted, and deserving of a wide readership among Southeast Asianists.

